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281106Z Oct 05

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 008380

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/27/2015

TAGS: PREL PGOV IN IS

SUBJECT: GOI TRYING TO SALVAGE ISRAEL RELATIONS

REF: A. NEW DELHI 6735

1B. NEW DELHI 7797

Classified By: PolCouns Geoff Pyatt for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

11. (C) Summary: Indian-Israel relations have hit a rough patch because of a recent lack of direction on the part of the ruling UPA government in New Delhi, but both sides say they intend to restore better ties. Over the next few weeks, Congress party leadership will affirm India's interest in maintaining Israel as a useful friend by dispatching several senior visitors to Jerusalem despite the potential for provoking domestic discord. End Summary.

Signs of Trouble

12. (C) Israeli DCM Yoed Magen told PolCouns October 28 that, following what both sides recognize as unsatisfactory Foreign Office consultations (Ref A), the GOI and Government of Israel intend to step up their political level consultations to strengthen their strained relationship. Israeli Ambassador Danieli recently called on Foreign Secretary Shyam Saran to "put everything on the table," Magen reported, including Israel's disappointment over the visit of Secretary (East) Rajiv Sikri, India's earlier fence-sitting toward Iranian nuclear ambitions and support for terrorism, and the perception of a growing chill in India-Israel relations.

13. (C) Saran professed to be unaware that the Israeli Prime Minister had requested a meeting with Indian PM Manmohan Singh on the margins of the UNGA summit in New York, which India's NY Mission had failed to secure. He also expressed surprise at the level of Danieli's concerns about the Sikri talks, which failed to produce even an anodyne joint statement. In return, Saran told Danieli of GOI concern with the "tough message" PM Singh heard from Jewish groups in New York, in contrast to the warm reception given to former PM AB Vajpayee. The PM was raked over the coals on Iran this year, Saran complained.

Mending Fences

14. (C) In what the Israeli Embassy expects as an effort to repair relations at the political level, senior Congress party leader and one-time PM aspirant Sharad Pawar will represent India in Jerusalem at the commemoration ceremony on the 10th anniversary of Yitzak Rabin's assassination. According to the Israeli Embassy, India is the only Asian country so far participating in the event. Additionally, Minister of Commerce and Industry Kamal Nath, another senior Congress political operative, will visit Israel November 9-10 for trade talks. He is slated to be the only international keynote speaker at Israel's annual economic conference.

15. (C) India's West Asia Envoy C Gharekhan will also travel to Israel and elsewhere in the Middle East in mid-November, on a trip postponed from September after Israel's FM, reflecting Tel Aviv's disappointment, signaled that he would not meet Gharekhan. Gharekhan will again request a meeting with the Foreign Minister, but the Israeli Embassy told us it is not clear the FM will agree to meet both him and Nath in short succession, especially if Gharekhan attends the one year anniversary of Arafat's death (which we are told will coincide with the Rabin commemoration). The Indian diplomat told us his visit will be an attempt to get India "back into the picture" on Israel-Palestine issues, where Gharekhan believes New Delhi could play an important supporting role (Ref B).

Comment: Serious Commitment from GOI

16. (C) The fact that the Congress Party is willing to let senior party operatives travel to Jerusalem at a time it is fighting a losing battle in state elections in Bihar, with a large Muslim vote in play, suggests that the top leadership is still committed to improving India's relationship with Israel. Thus far, however, the Congress government has been content to focus on the military dimensions of the Israel relationship, while submerging the more controversial political dimension. Gharekhan has mentioned India's

aspirations to be helpful in Mideast peace efforts several times, but the Congress leadership will have to decide how much public support it is willing to risk as it does so. New Delhi's balancing act of domestic and foreign priorities will get even more difficult as Israel ties add to the debate already raging on India's position vis-a-vis Iran.

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